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A SENSE OF LOSS: A STUDY OF
THE OLD ENGLISH POEM THE WIFE'S LAMENT

BY



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The undersigned certify that they have read, and
recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a
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ABSTRACT

Using a photocopy of the manuscript of The Wife's Lament as a guide, I have provided my own edition and translation of the poem. Chapter I provides an exegesis of The Wife's Lament and outlines the general direction that the thesis takes, its aims and intentions. Chapter II is concerned with the poem's roots in heroic folk tale, and its divergence from a strictly heroic tradition. It is also demonstrated that various motifs in The Wife's Lament reappear in the literature of the Middle English period. Chapter III examines briefly the history of Anglo-Saxon society of the eighth and ninth centuries, with reference to the various political and religious upheavals which form a background for this poem. The role of the woman in Anglo-Saxon poetry is dealt with in Chapter IV; an attempt is made to pinpoint certain associations which would be summoned up by her presence in the Old English literature of the period. Chapter V provides a detailed analysis of the style of the poem with a view to demonstrating the integration here of manner and matter. The final chapter attempts a definition of the Old English elegy, and an explanation of why I feel The Wife's Lament to be the most eloquent expression of this genre.

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*Feminis lugere honestum est,
viris meminisse.*

(It is considered appropriate for
women to mourn and for men to remember.)

Tacitus, Germania, cap. xxvii

NEW EDITION OF THE WIFE'S LAMENT

Ic þis giedd wrece bi me, ful geomorre,
minre sylfre sið. Ic þæt secgan mæg
hwaet ic yrmþa gebad, siþþan ic up weox,
niwes oþþe ealdes, no ma þonne nu.

A ic wite wonn minra wræcsipa.

Aerest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum
ofer yþa gelac; haefde ic uhtceare
hwaer min leodfruma londes wære.

Ða ic me feran gewat folgað secan,
wineleas wræcca, for minre weaþearfe,
ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan
þurh dyrne geþoht, þæt hy to dælden unc;
ðæt wit gewidost in woruldrice
lifdon ladlicost, ond mec longade.

Het mec hlaford min her heard niman;
ahte ic leofra lyt on þissum londstede,
holdra freonda. Forþon is min hyge geomor,
ða ic me ful gemæcne monnan funde
heardsæligne, hyge geomorne,
mod midendne, morþor hygendne.

Bliðe gebaero ful oft wit beotedan
þæt unc ne gedælde nemne ðeað ana

owiht elles. Eft is þæt onhworfen,
 is nu . . . swa hit no wære,
 freondscipe uncer. Sceal ic feor ge neah
 mines felaleofan fæhðu dreogan.

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
 under actreo in þam eordscraefe.
 Eald is þes eordsele, eal ic eom oflongad.
 Sindon dena dimme, duna uphea,
 bitre burgtunas brerum beweaxne,
 wic wyntna leas. Ful oft mec her wraþe begeat
 fromsiþ frean. Frynd sind on eorþan,
 leofe lidgende, leger weardiad.
 þonne ic on uhtan, ana gonge
 under actreo geond þas eordscrafu
 Ðær ic sittan mot sumorlangne dæg;
 þær ic wepan mæg mine wræcsiþas,
 eorfoda fela. Forþon ic æfre ne mæg
 þære modceare minre gerestan,
 ne ealles þæs longades þe mec on þissum life begeat.

A scyle geong mon wesian geomormod,
 heard heortan geþoht. Swylce habban sceal
 bliþe gebæro, eac þon breostceare,
 sinsorgna gedreag. Sy æt him sylfum gelong

eal his worulde wyn; sy ful wide fah
 feorres folclondes þæt min freond sited,
 under stanhlife, storme behrimed -
 wine werigmod, wære beflowen.
 On dreorsele dreoged se min wine
 micle modceare; he gemon to oft
 wynlicran wic. Wa bið þam þe sceal
 of langode leofes abidan.

TRANSLATION OF THE WIFE'S LAMENT

I recite this song of mourning, about myself, very sorrowfully, concerning my own destiny. I can tell you of what miseries I have endured since I grew up, of recent times or of long ago, no more than now. Ever I will suffer the torment of my exile's way.

First my lord departed hence from his people, over the tossing waves; I had care at dawn where my prince of the land was. Inasmuch as I departed on a journey to seek the service of some helpers, because of that, the man's kinsmen began to plot in secret to part us. After that we lived, most miserable, the furthest apart in this world, and longing filled me.

My lord bade me take up my dwelling here; I had few loved ones in this country, loyal friends. For this reason is my mind sorrowful when I found my well-mated man having hard fortune, mournful of mind, concealing his thoughts, thinking on violence.

With a carefree attitude, very often the two of us pledged that we would not part, except for death alone, nothing else. That is all changed about; our friendship is now as if it had never been. I must, far or near, take part in the feud of my much-beloved one.

Someone commanded me to stay in this forest grove, under the oak tree, in this earth-cave. Old is this earth hall; I am given over to longing. The valleys are dim, the hills high, the strongholds severely grown over with briars, dwellings without joy. Very often

here, the departure of my lord flooded me with anger. There are friends on the earth living pleasantly; they keep to their beds while I go alone at dawn under the oak tree, through the earth-cave. There I may sit throughout the summer day; there I can weep for my exile's way, my many miseries. For this reason I will never be able to find rest from the cares of my mind, nor from all the yearning that overcomes me in this life.

Ever must a young man be mindful of sorrows, stern the dictates of his heart. Even as he must have a carefree appearance, so also anxiety, the affliction of perpetual grief. Let all his worldly joy depend on himself; let him be very widely [known] an enemy of a distant land, in the way in which my friend sits, under a stone-cliff, covered with hoar-frost by the storm - my friend, depressed in his mind, surrounded by water. In a dreary hall, my friend suffers much grief; he remembers too often a more joyful dwelling. Woe is it for one who must wait in longing for a loved one.

I

INTRODUCTION

Through a re-editing and re-translation of the poem The Wife's Lament, I hope that I have provided a more instructional way of looking at what critics have long considered one of the more enigmatic pieces of Old English literature; and through a new interpretation, one that takes into account the many changes through which the Anglo-Saxon people were forced to go in regard to their traditional values and way of life, I hope to be able to add a further dimension to the study of a poem that has much to tell us about the Anglo-Saxon consciousness of a dying society.

Lines 1 - 5 establish the mood and genre of the entire poem that is to follow. That it is a personal complaint is made clear by the fact that the pronoun "ic" is used no less than five times, while "minr[e,a]" is used twice. However, a universal import is implied by the insertion, in the first line, of the formal, or ritual phrase "giedd wrecan", in the connotation in which it is used at the end of Beowulf, when the "Geatisc meowle" sings her "geomor-giedd" (ll. 3150); it is considered appropriate for a "word-giedd wrecan" (ll. 3172) or ritual song of mourning to be sung over Beowulf's funeral pyre. That the genre is that of the elegy, of sadness over the present situation with no particular hope for a brighter future, is indicated by the

adjective "geomorre" which is repeated many more times throughout the poem, the noun "yrmþa" or miseries, and the whole of line 5, in which she clearly states that there is no hope of escape either from her tormented state of mind, nor the physical fate of her being a lonely exile. Many critics, notably Levin Schücking, have argued that the speaker in this poem is not a woman, but a man, and that the feminine forms of "geomorre" and "minre selfe" can be explained away by crediting them to scribal error; however, it is my belief that this poem gains immeasurably in significance by virtue of the very fact that the speaker is a woman. Because of the woman's voice being used in combination with the elegiac mood, a new dimension is added to this work.

Lines 6 - 26 provide us with the necessary background material that explains the woman's present miserable situation. The order in which the events are described indicate the woman's agitated state of mind, as she goes from the situation which precipitated the present crisis, back, in her mind, through her coming to this land the first time, to the happy days in which she and her husband pledged their love. In line 23 we are abruptly returned to the present by the use of "nu" and "onhworfen" to prepare us for the next section, a picture of her life as it is now. The fact that the woman refers to her husband as "hlaford" (l. 6) and "leodfruma" (l. 8) as well as her "full gemæcne monnan" (l. 18) can be explained, I think, by the fact that

the Anglo-Saxons did not have a vocabulary fitted to the poetry of love. Their society had been a heroic one, in which deeds were important, not personal relationships. Like Wealhtheow in Beowulf, the woman had a definite place in her society; but her primary relationship to her husband, if we can believe the evidence of the poetry, was of a devoted member of her lord's household. Moreover, "hlaford" was often the word used in the laws to denote "husband" in the legal sense of the word.²

If we follow her narrative backwards, we find, from line 15, that at the time of their marriage, the husband brought his bride to live in his country, a place in which she had no friends. Therefore, when he became involved in some sort of hard fortune, and was forced to leave the country, presumably by his relatives, she had no one to whom to turn for aid. Going out in the world to seek help for herself and her husband, she is thwarted by her husband's Kinsmen who plot to keep them separated, for reasons that remain "dyrne" (l. 12), known only to them. In line 21, the elegiac theme of a happier past set against a bleak present appears when she speaks of a time when the lovers pledged that only death would part them. The phrase "blide gebæro" (l. 21) reappears in the last section of the poem where it takes on a rather ironic sense when contrasted with its context here. The mood changes abruptly at line 23b, where she suddenly breaks out of her reverie and returns to the facts of her life as she is living

it now; therefore, the phrase "feor ge neah" (l. 25) may refer to time as well as space, as we make a physical and mental leap to the next section. Just in passing I would note what I believe to be an effective use of the word "dreogan" here. It appears to have adopted its alternative meaning of "take part in", which would effectively explain away the argument that the wife blames her husband for her condition; "dreogan" also meaning "to suffer", and appearing in that capacity in line 50, the Anglo-Saxon reader would be able to make the associations necessary to the emphasizing of the sorrowful mood.

Lines 27 - 41 describe both the woman's present physical situation, and her present state of mind. She has been commanded to dwell, an outcast, in a forest grove, "wuda bearwe" (l. 27) in an earth cave, "in þam eordscæfe" (l. 28) under an oak tree, "actreo" (l. 28). The dim valleys, high hills, and deserted, briar-infested fortifications combine to produce a picture of desolation and absolute alone-ness. The natural human emotion of self-pity appear in lines 32b - 41, as the woman asks the timeless question "why me?", or "what did I ever do to deserve this?" She knows that there are others who are enjoying life while she must live alone, an exile, continuously sitting and mourning her lot in life. She had tried to seek help earlier, and seeing as she was unsuccessful, there seems to be nothing to do but wait. However, she seems to have no hope for the improvement of her situation, as indicated by her use of "æfre ne mæg" (l. 39)

in connection with the calming of her mind's sadness and longing.

There is an abrupt shift in tone and emphasis at line 42, where we enter what I believe to be a gnomic passage. The wife has been complaining about her own miseries, but her mourning has become a kind of rhythmic chant, which leads her naturally into a "gnomic" frame of mind and an attempt at a universal application of this mourning. "A" plus the verb "sculon" appears to be gnomic formula, as it appears twice in the Maxims, at I, 2, l. 103, "a mon scealse þeah leofes wenan", and at I, 3, ll. 177 - 178, "a scyle þa rincas geraedan lædan/ ond him ætsomne swēfan." The woman here appears to recite the type of gnome for which the maxims were famous: ever must a young man be mindful of sorrows, but stern the dictates of his heart. However, she thinks this over and finds that in reality, from which she feels that the gnome is remote, even though a man look outwardly carefree, he cannot escape the constant sorrow that she knows to be the actuality of human existence. She says that if the young man of the gnomic passage were to be placed in her husband's position he would know what it means to suffer. With the bringing together of the young man and her husband, the woman returns from the universal to the particular, and we get an imaginative projection of where she believes her husband to be; she paints us a picture of the heroic, Anglo-Saxon version of hell. There is no hope here, no relief from sorrows, only a void, a life empty of anything but longing for something which seems destined never to be.

The preceding has been an explanation of the way in which I believe the poem must be read on the narrative level. However, there is much more to be understood by looking into this poem as a song of mourning for a lost civilization, for the dying life of the heroic Anglo-Saxon world. There are many problems to be worked out. First and foremost, we must see if this poem is unique, coming out of a distinct Anglo-Saxon view of life, or whether it may have had forbears in Germanic or Celtic folk tradition. We must examine the conditions of Anglo-Saxon society that might have given rise to the necessity for an expression of this type of sorrow. Also, we must examine the position of the woman in Anglo-Saxon society, as one that would make her situation in this poem a valid one, and one that would be construed as having particular meaning. An inquiry into the role of the woman in other Old English poetry will provide us with some insight into how the Anglo-Saxons viewed the figure of the mourning woman, and what associations would naturally be summoned up by her mere presence. We must look carefully at the construction of the poem itself, to see if the manner and the matter coincide. I believe that there is evidence to be found here to prove that it is an extremely compact and well-constructed poem. This seems to be the only extant version of the poem combining elements of the elegy and the personal love lyric in the Old English canon; what then, makes the fusion of these two genres so meaningful here? And finally, there must be a new evaluation of the

relationship of the final twelve lines to the main body of the poem. There must be some reason for what I believe to be the rapid shifting in mood emphasized by the verbs constantly changing from subjunctive to indicative forms.

The exegeses of this poem that have been hitherto provided have ranged widely, from a four-fold Christian interpretation to an interpretation based on Irish myth. However, none have satisfactorily explained the relationship between The Wife's Lament and the elegy form; none have attempted to unearth any reasons why this poem, as I believe it has been, should have been produced by a society recognized as heroic. What place can it be seen to have as an expression of grief, of mourning, over lost happiness? Perhaps in the succeeding chapters, some more light can be shed on a small but important poem that seems to me evidence of the Anglo-Saxon's recognition of the process of the transformation of the way of life of an entire race of people.

II

POSSIBLE SOURCES AND ANALOGUES

Because The Wife's Lament is somewhat of a phenomenon in the canon of Old English poetry as well as being a puzzle in itself, many critics have sought to explain its existence by arguing that it must belong to a tradition other than that of Anglo-Saxon England; the theme according to this theory, must have been pirated and translated into English vernacular. What would seem more plausible to me would be to try to show that the theme of the deserted woman, so common in pagan, heroic societies, must then be a natural outgrowth of that type of society. Its existence in eighth Century England, therefore, should come as no surprise. What marks it as a typically English way of handling this literary motif, however, is its elegiac overtone, and its relationship to a dying society.

That the forsaken woman is a familiar theme in pagan heroic poetry is most evident with reference to the Old Norse sagas. Some critics have expressed some hesitation about accepting the speaker of The Wife's Lament as being a woman. Both Levin Schücking¹ and Rudolph Bamba² postulate that the speaker is a man, largely because there is no other Old English poetry to which they can look to find a basis for the way in which a woman could be a spokesman for a heroic society. And yet, when we look at the Norse sagas, certainly

heroic, pagan poetry, and most likely composed long before the Old English poetry we are discussing, we find a woman speaker quite common, and used for similar purposes, in some cases. The Norse seem to find no discrepancy in having both romantic and heroic elements contained in the same poem, as both are natural outgrowths of a popular society. A few examples are perhaps in order to illustrate the fact that the grieving woman was an oft-seen figure in the eddas. In the "Sigurtharkvitha en Skamma"³, we find Guthrun lamenting thus:

9. Now Gjuki's child to her lover goes,
And the Hunnish king with his wife is happy;
Joyless I am and mateless ever,
Till cries from my heavy heart burst forth
(p. 424)

In the "Guthrunarkvitha II", we find the situation of relatives who have parted the lovers Sigurth and Guthrun, and who have seen to Sigurth's death. The family feud, it seems, was also a popular theme.

3. Till my brothers let me no longer have
The best of heroes my husband to be;
Sleep they could not, or quarrels settle,
Till Sigurth they at last had slain.
..... (p. 452)
12. Never so black had seemed the night
As when in sorrow by Sigurth I sat.
(p. 454)

The "Lay of Oddrun" or "Oddrunargratr" presents this picture of feminine grief:

31. For well I loved the warrior brave
The giver of swords as my very self.

32. Thou didst see and listen the while I said
 The mighty grief that was mine and theirs;
 Each man lives as his longing wills,
 Oddrun's lament is ended now.

(p. 479)

The "Atlamol" offers this piece of gnomie wisdom uttered by Guthrun:

69. But the fierceness of men rules the fate of women
 The tree bows low if bereft of its leaves -
 The tree bends over if the roots are cleft under it.

(p. 524)

In the "Skirnismol" is this expression of constant longing, not unlike that found in The Wife's Lament.

4. How shall I tell thee, thou hero young,
 Of all my grief so great?
 Though every day the elf beam dawns,
 It lights my longing never.

(p. 109)

And finally, in the "Guthrunarkvot", this sad tale is told by Guthrun of her life of sorrow.

9. Weeping Guthrun, Gjuki's daughter,
 Went sadly before the gate to sit,
 And with tear-stained cheeks to tell the tale
 Of her mighty griefs, so many in kind.
10. Three home-fires knew I, three hearths I knew,
 Home was I brought by husbands three;
 But Sigurth only of all was dear,
 He whom my brothers brought to his death.

20. Remember, Sigurth, what once we said,
 When together both on the bed we sat,
 That mightily thou to me wouldst come,
 From hell and I from earth to thee.
21. Pile ye up, jarls, the pyre of oak,
 Make it the highest a hero e'er had,
 Let the fire burn my grief-filled breast,
 My sore-pressed heart, till my sorrows melt.

22. May nobles all less sorrows know,
 And less the woes of women become,
 Since the tale of this lament is told.
 (p. 541)

The purpose of my quoting these passages from the Norse poetry is to let them serve as a sort of standard of the type of popular heroic poetry sprung from a pagan society, so that I may set against this standard its Old English counterpart, with a view to examining the changes wrought in the form by a different society. In the Northern sagas, the reason for the lament is contained in the dramatic action; "the author's sympathy is not in the direct effusions but in the rendering of drama."⁴ The lament is often only a prelude to further action, even on the part of the woman speaker; she may lament, then set out in search of revenge, or she may commit suicide. Thus, in saga the lament is not an end in itself, as it seems to be in The Wife's Lament.

The situation in which the forsaken wife finds herself is a common one. The woman alone weeping is a figure to be found in Welsh, Irish, and Icelandic as well as Norse tales,⁵ and so I do not find it surprising that we find a woman speaker in Old English poetry as well. A. N. Doane maintains that The Wife's Lament is not a heroic poem because there are no proper names.⁶ This, however, does not exclude the contention that the situation described in this poem, familiar to Anglo-Saxon society because it was a heroic theme, had been changed and adapted to suit the particular needs and mood of the

time. The Norse society was a more or less stable one during the time of the writing of their heroic sagas, while at the time that The Wife's Lament is supposed to have been composed, approximately the eighth century, Anglo-Saxon England was in the midst of an enormous cultural re-evaluation, as well as being engaged in numerous wars inflicted upon them by would-be conquerors. This lament is not one in which a particular legendary figure is weeping over her famous husband. It is a personal enough poem in the sentiments of love which it expresses, but it is generalized to the point where, like the old woman's lament at the conclusion of Beowulf, she is not weeping for him who died, but for those who are left behind.

In the heroic saga, the future and the past are rarely given much consideration. Occasionally, as in the "Guthrunarkvot", the speaker remembers a happier time, but the specifically elegiac note of happier past leading to miserable present and bleak future is not dwelt on as the core of the poem. The central issue in the heroic saga is the story, the continuing action, whereas, in The Wife's Lament, the situation has arrived at a stasis before the poem begins. Instead of events related in chronological order, they are given in the order in which they impinge on the speaker's consciousness, a factor which removes it further from the realm of cause and effect narration. The future does not contain the promise of any further action, or even of her impending death; there is pictured for us only

the continuing succession of sorrow-filled days stretching away into eternity.

The Wife's Lament, then, is a poem which seems to contain at its core, a familiar heroic tale, that of the woman who has been parted from her husband by the machinations of his relatives, and who is bewailing her lot. At this point, the Old English poem takes on its own characteristics and leaves the world of heroic action. The society described in this poem is that of the heroic world. Its laws still apply here. The wife is completely alone when deserted by her husband's kinsmen, whose legal duty it is to protect her. The torment she describes as having been inflicted on her and her husband is the hell of the pagan world. In a society in which kin-group and comitatus, not the individual, are the basic cultural units, he who is alone is the most wretched person possible. An empty, joyless hall grown over with briars, "brerum beweaxne" (l. 31), the stony cliff, the hail storms, the enclosing waters, all belong to the Northern heroic version of hell, and not the fire - and - brimstone hell of the Christian poems.

The action in this poem is all internal, as the woman's life is static at this point in time. The inner conflict not consequent with the actual events of the poem is a new concept in heroic poetry, and is introduced into Old English in what we have come to know as the elegy, a genre unique to Anglo-Saxon literature. The heroic setting

has been used because it would have been familiar to the people listening to the poem; from this point, the weeping woman, because she cannot be identified with any particular figure, becomes a symbol of the heroic way of life, of comitatus society, which is lost, and alone, and betrayed by kinsmen, and not knowing where to turn for help. The old way of life was slowly being eroded by the forces of change; these forces were, in the main, imposed from the outside, in the form of foreign invasions and the introduction of Christianity, and thus, because they did not evolve naturally, were creating a sort of psychological inter-regnum in Anglo-Saxon society. This sense of loss, or rather of losing one's grip on the old way of life is being expressed, in elegiac form, adapted from a familiar heroic, pagan situation, in The Wife's Lament.

Wulf and Eadwacer, the only other Old English poem narrated by a woman, seems much more allied to the folk tradition. The primary difference between it and The Wife's Lament lies, I believe in the tone; there is more of the old desire for revenge in the appeal to Eadwacer and the verb "toslited" (l. 18) or "tear asunder" when talking of their relationship. The action is more violent; also, we get the impression that it is continuing. Furthermore, we even have the use of proper names here, which pinpoints the tale more exactly. I am inclined to believe with A.C. Bouman that Wulf and Eadwacer has much in common with the Weland legend in the "Volundarkvitha",⁷ and

is more nearly allied than The Wife's Lament with the saga form.

Kemp Malone sees The Wife's Lament as a Frauenlied, or woman's song, and observes in it the seeds of lyricism. This may be quite true, as the elegy form itself, inclining as it does to the expression of inner conflict, leans toward the lyric genre. As he says about The Wife's Lament, "we have here a popular poem, composed indeed under the influence of the prevailing literary mode of its day but not bound by the conventions of that mode."⁸

Gareth Dunleavy advances the theory that this poem may be related to the Irish tale of Liádan and Quirithir,⁹ and Fitzgerald sees it as having many things in common with the folk tale The Search for the Lost Husband.¹⁰ Both of these articles are attempts to fit the poem into a mold for which it was not meant, and the result tortures the text of The Wife's Lament and distorts the tale. Dunleavy admits that the monastic setting so basic to the Irish tale is absent from the Anglo-Saxon one, and the supernatural lover of the folk tale does not seem to be the husband here. In both cases, the critics were not willing to admit that the theme of The Wife's Lament might be a common enough one not to need an exact correspondent in the realm of folk literature.

In the Middle Ages, the weeping woman again appears, both in the religious and secular poetry of the day. In the religious poetry she is seen as the Virgin Mary under the cross, weeping, in the

beautiful "Marian laments". In the secular poetry, she is the forsaken maiden looking for her lover. In both cases, one may note the adaptation of a familiar folk theme to present poetic needs. The religious lyric fuses the ideal woman, both earthly and heavenly mother, in the figure of Mary, as we see her crying:

"Jhesu!", so she sobbed,
 So hir sone was bobbed
 And of his lyf robbed;
 Seying these wordes, as I seye thee:
 "Who can not wepe, come lerne at me."¹¹

In the well-known "Stond wel Moder under rode", Mary says:

Sone, thou best so meke and mynde
 Ne wyte me nought - it is my kynde
 That I for thee this sorwe make.¹²

The poet recognizes that it is the ideal woman's role to weep over the lot of her loved ones. In "Quia Amore Langueo", Mary weeps for the fate of mankind, thus further taking up the strain we see starting in The Wife's Lament.

She made compleynte thus by hir oon
 For mannes soule was wrapped in wo:
 "I may not leve mankynde allone
 Quia Amore langueo."¹³

The secular mediaeval poetry seemed also to find an appropriate use for the woman alone bewailing the fate that life has dealt her. In a German piece by Dietmar von Aist,¹⁴ this is seen most vividly.

There stood a Lady alone
 and gazed over moor
 and gazed toward her love
 till she saw a falcon flying.
 Hail, falcon, happy bird!
 You fly where your pleasure lies:
 you choose in the wood
 a tree that you like.
 I did the same:
 I chose for myself a man
 that my eyes picked,
 that is the envy of beautiful women.
 Alas, when will they leave my love?
 Yet no other lover I want.

Although the idea behind this poem and other secular lyrics like it has been romanticized greatly, we can still detect the figure at the centre of the poem as the weeping woman. What I wish to bring out with the mention of these later poems is simply that despite the hiatus which exists between the latest of the Old English poetry and the earliest Middle English Poetry, in England and Europe the familiar figures and situations are found to recur. It is not necessary to argue that there is a continuing tradition, necessarily, because of this we cannot be entirely sure. What we can postulate with some certainty, however, is that the figure of the forsaken woman is a literary product of a popular tradition in society, and that it is entirely feasible that this figure should be able to be easily adapted to the current poetic trends.

The Wife's Lament, then, as far as I am concerned, is a poem that has grown out of a heroic society, and heroic traditions,

using the setting of popular heroic, pagan tale, and which has been adapted to the elegiac mood through the introduction of an introspective, inward-turning mood, and a need to express the break-up of an unstable society in a way which would be understood by the people. This poem is an attempt, not so much to console a troubled society but to put into words a popular feeling of despair, of discouragement, and of loss.

III

CHANGES IN ANGLO-SAXON SOCIETY

Such linguistic and metrical evidence as there is would appear to support the usual attribution of these poems [The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, and The Ruin] to the eighth century. The flexibility of the syntax, the thorough integration of the kennings into the flow of the verse without impeding its movement, the expert handling of the alliterative verse technique to effect changes of pace and mood, these are features which suggest a period prior to the more ornate and elaborate verse of the Cynewulfian school.¹

If we accept Leslie's contention that The Wife's Lament was composed during the eighth century, and there seems no reasonable cause for disputing this, then it becomes even more plausible to recognize in this poem an expression of the extreme confusion and despair of a people overwhelmed by violent times. As Hodgkin states in his A History of the Anglo-Saxons: "From the close of Bede's history in 731 to the decisive victory of Egbert over Mercia in 829 is the darkest and most barren century in the history of Christian England."² It may also be of interest to note that Leslie suggests that a Mercian setting for this poem would "harmonize with such linguistic indications of dialect as there are".³ By examining briefly some of the historical events of this period, and the effects that the coming of Christianity had on the Anglo-Saxon society, and also by means of an inquiry into the changing nature of some of the laws governing these people, I hope to be able to provide a picture of

the kind of unstable society that would be apt to produce elegiac poetry, and particularly The Wife's Lament. As well, it is interesting to look at the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society, with a view to realizing that their role was undergoing a profound change, a fact that, combined with many others, makes it all the more appropriate for this outpouring of disillusionment to come from the lips of a woman.

The history of Britain, as can be seen by any of its many records, is known for its violence, turbulence, and instability. The Saxon invaders killed off the Britons and laid waste the Roman towns until, in the third quarter of the fifth century, there was hopeless collapse, and the remaining Roman Britons were forced into slavery. Their towns were either destroyed immediately, or declined and decayed gradually as the few survivors died off. Only a few, such as London, were revived during Saxon times. We can see here the first in a succession of take-overs by an alien civilization. The Briton race remained, but gradually their territories and customs were taken over by the Germanic invaders. Profound changes also took place in the structure of the society. To the old aristocracy of birth was added the aristocracy of wealth and service;⁴ the gesith position was usurped by that of the thegn, as the emphasis shifted from the primary importance being on companionship, to its being on service. Also, the position of the freeman was undermined by the extension of the kingdoms;

as a state became bigger, and the king and his men became further removed from contact with the village folk, the gulf between farmer and fighter became too wide to bridge. One reason why ordinary free-men play no part in heroic poetry such as the Beowulf and scarcely appear in the pages of Bede is that "both of these sources represent conditions at or after the end of the heathen period rather than the conditions of the age of migration."⁵ Because of the feeling that society at this time was indeed built on shaky foundations, in their poetry the Anglo-Saxons expressed a need to cling together for support and a feeling either of pity or suspicion for those who were not anchored in a village community. Therefore, the situation that would be likely to evoke the most sympathy from an Anglo-Saxon audience would be the cry of one who was alone. As it says in the Maxims:

Earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan,
 Wineleas wunian hafaþ him wyrd geteod;
 Betre him wære þæt he broþor ahte,
 begen hi annes monnes,
 Eorles eaforan wæran.

(Maxims I, 3, 172-175)

About this time also, another cultural upheaval was beginning to be felt in Britain. The Christian religion had begun to move over from the Continent during the monastic movement of the sixth century, and although an overlord's acceptance of Christianity did not bind his dependents, the Germanic devotion to the comites would bring many factors to bear on the decision. However, not all of the Kings wished to be converted, and for many years men like Ethelfrith (593-617 A.D.)

waged a continuous battle against the evangelical Scots. In the years which followed, in one kingdom after another, the fierce fighting proved how slight was the hold of the new religion which depended for its survival on the patronage of a few great men, and how persistent the old heathenism. Christian kings raised to be their successors heathen sons who undid all the work of conversion started by their fathers. It is no wonder indeed that men were confused and did not know what to believe. Often an attempt was made at a consolidation of forces through the marriage of, say, a heathen King, to a Christian princess, but the many fights continued until, at the end of the seventh century, there was a temporary condition of unstable equilibrium among the three chief kingdoms, Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex.

When on the surface it appeared that Christianity was well-entrenched on the island, the question of what type of Christianity, Roman or Celtic, should be supreme, was raised, and so, not only was there still the major division between Christian and heathen, but there were now schisms between the various sects of the new religion. The disorganization and lack of discipline could be felt in every aspect of society, from King to "ceorl". One can imagine the surprise and dismay that accompanied the overriding of the policy of a king and his councillors by a papal decree. ⁶

During the period in which The Wife's Lament is supposed to have been composed, Mercia was principal among the powerful kingdoms,

but it was in the process of being overcome by Egbert of Wessex. Northumbria, the kingdom which had been in power before Mercian supremacy, underwent a hundred years of anarchy after its decline from power, and presumably Mercia could look forward to much the same fate. During the years from 705 to 806 A.D., five times a Northumbrian king was murdered or slain in civil war, five times was a king deposed, four times he abdicated, and once the king wore his crown for only twenty-seven days. Thus, the eighth and ninth centuries were periods of external wars and internal conflict. In 793, the first Viking raids took place; there was virtually no opposition, as the Anglo-Saxons were so weakened by internal struggles that they could not withstand an attack from the outside. The old order was breaking down. Sons were turning against fathers, brothers against brothers, either as a result of religious conflicts or boundary disputes. The old bonds of fidelity between lord and man had been weakened, and, in some cases, broken by open rebellion. As we see in Wulfstan's Sermo Lupi ad Anglos of 1014, the Church regarded the Viking raids as punishment for the wickedness of the Anglo-Saxons, for their failure to abdicate the old ways in favour of a wholehearted acceptance of Christianity. Wulfstan was aware of the break-up of the kin-group, as he states:

Ne bearn nu foroft gesib gesibban þe ma þe fremdan, ne fæder his bearne, ne hwilum bearn his agenum fæder, ne broðor oþrum; ne ure ænig his lif fadode swa swa he scolde, ne gehadode regollice ne læwede lahllice.

(1. 62-66)

Of the raids as punishment for accumulated sins, he says:

swa hit þincan mæg, nu fela geara unrihta fela tealte getrywða
ægwaer mid mannum,

(l. 60-62)

and similarly:

ful earhlice laga scandilice nydgyld þurh Godes yrre us syn gemæne,
understande se þe cunne; fela ungelimpa gelimpð þysse þeode oft
gelome. Ne dohte hit nu lange inne ne ute, ac þæs here hete on
geþelhwilcan ende oft gelome, Engle nu lange eal sigelease to
swyþe geyrigde þurh Godes yrre; flotmen swa strange þurh Godes þa
funge þæt oft on gefeohte an feseð tyne hwilum læs, hwilum ma,
eal for urum synnum.

(l. 108-116)

Therefore, all the Church was able to do was rail at the people for something which they either did not undertand or could do nothing about. There was no answer forthcoming from that source, nothing to cling to if neither God nor their ancient tribal wisdom could support them. The State itself, what the Anglo-Saxon saw as the reason for being, the entire comitatus system itself was crumbling from within. Each locality was alone to find an answer to its problem of the lack of unity or else be helpless before the Vikings.

Now that a background has been provided against which we may set this poem and others of its time, it is much easier to visualize why the history of the Anglo-Saxon people should give rise to the elegiac form. There was nothing to look forward to in Britain at this time but more fighting, and the increasing breakdown of the old heroic, comitatus way of life. The Christian religion did not seem able to provide an answer to how to overcome the Vikings, but was instead

another source of dissent among the natives themselves. The kings who had been converted to Christianity were also trying to effect a change in the running of the country by altering the tone of the laws. The subtle change that was being effected is very easily observed by a look at the laws which concerned the women in Anglo-Saxon England.

In the earliest written laws, those of Ethelbert of Kent in 602-603 A.D., we see that a woman has essentially the same status as a man of comparable rank. It states in this set of laws that: "the compensation to be paid to an unmarried woman shall be on the same scale as that paid to a freeman".⁷ Also, divorce was essentially a matter of mutual agreement, wherein if the woman wanted to leave, she did so, taking half of their possessions. A lady could hold land in her own right and dispose of it freely, also defend her right in the courts if need be. In the Domesday Book, it is written that Asa of Yorkshire held her land separate and free from domination and control by her husband so that he could not sell or forfeit it. After their separation, she withdrew with all her land and possessed it as a lady.⁸

When a woman married and was taken to another district, her kinsmen were to have assurance that no wrong would be done to her and that they be allowed to atone for any offence she might commit. If a woman was left a widow, according to the early laws, she was to be protected with her children, if any, by her husband's kinsmen, and

breach of guardianship over a widow was considered an extremely serious crime, carrying the heavy penalty of fifty shillings.⁹ This is essentially the situation that is being described in The Wife's Lament. The husband may or may not be dead, but at least she is unprotected with him gone, and the fact that his kinsmen are disobeying the time-honoured laws and customs makes her position more pitiable, and serves to illustrate vividly the breakdown of the old comitatus system. We see in Ethelred's Code of 1008 that a widow is to be "under the protection of God and the King,"¹⁰ a much looser arrangement than before. An individual is coming more and more to be considered responsible for his own welfare. The family or community spirit, so vital to the Germanic way of life, is being supplanted by a new code, one which is completely foreign to the northern way of thinking. As well, the old custom of giving property and priceless gems in return for a wife was changed by the church, until by the time of the Laws of Cnut, in 1020-1023, it is stated that no woman is ever to be given for money, unless, [a man] chooses to give anything of his own free will.¹¹

Thus we may see that the role of the woman in Anglo-Saxon society was definitely undergoing a change, along with, for that matter, the roles of all members of that social system. The emphasis was shifting from the group to the individual, and the Church was trying to supplant the Germanic code of one for one blood revenge or financial compensation, with that of the justice and mercy of the law of

the Lord. As well-meaning as many of these changes were doubtless meant to be, they were completely foreign to the way of life of the Anglo-Saxon people. In some places, compromise was tried, where the best of both customs were adopted. The bishops gathered followers around them, whom they taught to carry on and extend their work, thus trying to carry the *comitatus* into religious life, but it had no profound effect on society as a whole. Christianity, as an eastern religion, preached the Pauline doctrine of the subjection of women, but this was an idea alien to the Germanic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon world. Men of Anglo-Saxon stock often described themselves as sons or grandsons of women, the reason being that sometimes the land came down through the maternal side of the family. King Alfred began the practice of consolidating the property on the male side of the line.

The women of early Anglo-Saxon England were respected as were the German women in the time of Tacitus. They had a distinct place in society, usually standing for the ideal of civilized behaviour in a violent age. Women appear in a more favourable light in Old English verse than they do in the gnomic poetry, as is true in the Latin Pentadius, the Icelandic Havamal and the Irish Tecosa Cormaic,¹² because they were essentially pictured as opposed to battles and blood feuds; they were the preservers, not the destroyers of life. When this stable element in society felt the breaking-up of the way of life it was trying to save, what better way to express this than in the elegy?

To return now to The Wife's Lament, we can see in this poem the signs of the decadence of the comitatus society: relatives turned against one another, a wife left alone in the wilderness without the protection of kin or comites, the fortified towns overgrown with briars, useless as a defense. There is no hope here of arresting the internal collapse of the Anglo-Saxon way of life. It is dying, and there is no way of saving it; the attempt by the woman to translate her predicament into some sort of gnomic, traditional solution breaks down in the face of reality. I therefore deem it exceedingly appropriate that the lament here be uttered by a woman. Given the background of British history that we have, the knowledge of the decline of a civilization from within, and the shifting role of a formerly stable element in that civilization, there is every reason to suppose that this elegy is not merely private love poetry, nor an adaptation of an heroic folk-tale, although it is certainly an amalgam of both of these, but it is also a people's lament for the loss of a centre of meaning for their way of life.

IV

THE WOMAN IN ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

From the prominent place assigned the woman in folk-tale, it is evident that the Germanic mind did indeed recognize the potential for elegy inherent in a sad story told by a woman, but I contend that it was not until the disintegration of the comitatus system in the face of a take-over by a Christian, feudal type of society that Anglo-Saxon literature made use of this potential.

If we begin with Beowulf, a poem embracing the period both before and during the break-up of the heroic society, we see Wealhtheow as representing the ideal woman of her time. In ll. 612-626, the public woman goes about her tasks, contributing to the welfare and preservation of the society.

Eode Wealhþeow ford
Cwen Hroðgares cynna gemindig
Grette goldhroden cuman on healle,
ond þa freolic wif ful gesealde
aerest East-Dena edel wearde;
bæd hine blidne æt þære beor þege
leodum leofne; he on lust geþege
symbol ond seful, sigerof cyning.
Ymbeode þa ides Helminga
dugude ond geogude dæl æghwylcne,
sinc fato sealde oppæt sæl alamp
þæt hio Beowulfe beag hroden cwen,
mode gefungen, medoful ætbaer.
Grette Geata leod
Wisfæst wordum . . .

That this is meant to be taken as a passage of description

of what is "fitting" can best be illustrated by a reference to Maxims I, 2, the repository of communal knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon heroic world, in the passage ll. 81-92, which states that:

Cyning sceal mid ceape cwene bicgan
 bunum ond beagum; bu sceolon ærest
 geofum god wesan. Guð sceal in eorle,
 Wig geweaxan, ond wif geþeon
 leof mid hyre leodum, leoht mod wesan,
 rune healdan, rumheort beon
 mearum ond maþmum, meodor ædenne
 for gesiðmægen symle æghwær
 eodor ædelinga ærest gegretan,
 for man fulle to frean hond
 ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
 bold agendum bæm ætsomme.

This passage is followed by the one discoursing on the virtues of the Frisian wife, also a type of ideal womanhood of the period. When the husband returns from a journey:

. leof wilcuma
 Frysan wife, þonne flota stondeð;
 biþ his ceol cumen ond hyre ceorl to ham,
 agen æt geofa, ond heo hine in ladaþ
 wæsced his warig hrægl ond him syleþ wæde niwe,
 liþ him on londe þæs his lufe bæded.
 (Maxims I, 2, 946-99)

In sharp contrast to the good qualities of Wealhtheow, the Frisian wife, and Hygd, the wife of Hygelac, stands Thryth, the wife of Offa, of whom it is said that no man might look at her but that he would be marked for death because of some wrong she fancied in him. The Beowulf poet goes on to editorialize that, "ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw / idese to efnanne, þeah de hio ænlicu sy / þætte freoduwebbe feores onsæce / æfter lige torne leofne mannan". (ll. 1940-1943)

Here we see the aspect of the role of the woman in comitatus society as being that of peacemaker, one who with her gracious demeanour and generosity is able to overcome misunderstanding that might arise within the group in the hall. It is said elsewhere of Wealhtheow that:

. Hwylum mæru cwen,
 fridusibb folca flet eall geondhwearf,
 baedde byre geonge; oft his beahwridan
 secge (sealde), aer hie to setle geong.
 (11. 2016-2019)

The first hint that we get in Beowulf that the role of woman as peacemaker is not as effective as it used to be can be seen in the passage where it is mentioned that the daughter of Hrothgar, Freawaru, has been betrothed to Ingeld, the son of Froda, in order to heal the rift caused by Froda's death during a battle between the two tribes. It is stated at the end of this piece that Hrothgar

. þæt ræd talad
 þæt he mid dy sife wælfæhpa dæl
 sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær
 æfter leodhryre lytle hwile
 bongar buged þeah seo bryd dugu!
 (11. 2027-2031)

This seems to point the way to a time when the old methods of establishing peace will be found to be of no avail. All the more reason it is then why we should not be surprised to see, in a poem like The Wife's Lament, a woman who cries out because she is frustrated and powerless to carry out her time-honoured duties as maker of peace.

The figure of the lamenting woman occurs in two instances in Beowulf and introduces the woman as traditional figure of mourning. I do not intend to discuss Grendel's mother, because she is outside the pale of society and thus not subject to the same laws and codes of conduct. Hildeburgh has lost a son and a brother; "þæt wæs geomuru ides!" (l. 1075); she weeps at her fate "syþan morgen com" (l. 1077), having seen the treachery of the Eotens. At the funeral pyre, it is said that she lamented in song measures, "geomrode gieddum" (l. 1118). Here we first encounter the word "giedd", which is used to denote the "formal" song, which had become part of the strictly regulated funeral rites. It came to take on a ritual, public character as it was entrusted to professional female mourners.¹ It also contains, however, an element of spontaneous personal emotion and consequently, an element of lyric poetry. Thus we have the beginnings of the feminine elegy: a lyric outburst in the context and using the language of ritualized funeral services. At the close of Beowulf, the old Geatish woman sings her "giomorgyd" (l. 3150) as she laments the death of Beowulf; but her song of sorrow is not so much for him as it is for those who are left behind to face the onset of "hearm dagas, hearde ondrede, / wael fylla worn, wigendes egesan, / hyndo ond haeftnyd". (ll. 3153-3155) There are many emotional ties here, to the hero, but the song is essentially one of public sorrow, of mourning for the passing of a way of life, the comitatus society.

The lamenting woman was thus a natural figure for the scop to seize upon when he wanted to convey the sense of loss that accompanied the death of heroic codes in the face of the coming of the new and confusing values of a Christian feudal society.

This argument leads us directly to The Wife's Lament, but before I deal with it, I would like to look briefly at the female figures in some of the other short Anglo-Saxon poems. In Widsith, the oldest poem in the Old English canon, we have a picture of Ealhild, bestowing gifts:

Ond me þa Ealhild oþerne forgeaf,
dryht cwen dugude, dohtor Eadwines.
Hyre lof lengde geond londa fela,
þonne ic be songe secgan sceolde
hwaer ic under swegle selast wisse
gold hrodene cwen giefte bryttian.

The riddles also yield a good deal of information about the Anglo-Saxon woman; the nightingale or jay is likened to a female jester, loudly mimicing a player's song. Riddle Number 20, "The Sword", pictures the woman as hostile to war. Seeing as the woman is peacemaker, the sword "wirum dol, wife abelge / wonie hyre willan; heo me wom spreced, / floced hyre folmum, firenaþ mec wordum, / ungod galed" (ll. 32-35). Thus, the woman's weapon is her power over the use of words. Her scathing denouncement of the trappings of war does not presuppose in her an ardent hostility to the comitatus system itself. Far from it; the woman had a definite place in this scheme of living. As we have seen from the laws, she was remarkably independent in many ways, and

had a value bestowed upon her at birth, just as a man had his wergild. An offence to a woman was quite as serious as that to a man, and demanded the appropriate revenge. It is just that the woman was expected not to be the one who went to battle. Her place was in the hall, caring for the warriors, and healing any breaches in the good fellowship of the troop. When, with the coming of Christianity, new rules of conduct and new codes were being introduced into the society by invaders and the Church, the woman's role became much more dependent and menial, in accordance with the eastern customs that came with Christianity, and the ideal woman was no longer the one who was generous with gifts, but the archetypical figure of the Virgin Mary.

This is perhaps a round-about way of saying that because the woman's place in society was undergoing a drastic change, and because the figure of the weeping woman was a common one connected with public mourning and the ritualized songs of funeral service, the shift from public mourning figure to private mourning figure was an easy one, and it was a natural and logical extension for the woman to be identified with the elegy, as the mood had already been established by her former roles. Thus I see The Wife's Lament as a central expression of the loss of the comitatus way of life as incorporated into a song of private sorrow. The poem, as I see it, has many emotional ties with the final passage of the Beowulf, and sees as little hope for happiness in the future as is found there. The opening

line contains the "giedd" and the "geomorre", in order to establish both the mood and the genre. In case you should be inclined to view this merely as private narrative, you are discouraged by the formal implications of the word "giedd". The poem classifies itself as an elegy; the woman speaks constantly of her "exile path" and "exile journey". This is at the same time a personal love poem, unique except perhaps for Wulf and Eadwacer; however, the latter has more connections with folk-song than it does with elegy, even though a woman lamenting injustices done her is the principal figure, and it does tell of separation. Despite the attempts to link The Wife's Lament and The Husband's Message, the two poems have only the separation theme in common. The mood and general format of The Husband's Message is so positive and optimistic that it would appear to belong to another genre altogether, and because of this, I find it impossible to link the two poems.

That the Anglo-Saxons did not have a flexible enough vocabulary to express personal love properly is evident from the ambivalent way in which the husband is addressed. With the change of woman from public to private figure, identifiable only in the existence of her husband, confusion results. Is the relationship of husband and wife that of tribal lord and helpmate or that of lover and beloved? The woman here weeps for the fact that she is not able to make peace within her adopted kin-group. The civil fighting among

kinsmen is another piece of evidence for the break-up of the comitatus. At the close of the poem, the woman tries to find some comfort in a gnomic passage, in the expression of traditional wisdom, but it is to no avail. Ignoring sorrow with a "blide gebæro" (l. 44) will not do in this case. The old methods are no longer viable; no answers are forthcoming. One must simply wait and see what will happen, and the poem ends on a note of mourning consistent with the weeping woman.

With the introduction into the canon of Old English poetry of the Christian "saint's life" poem and Biblical epic, translated and adapted from the Latin, an entirely new dimension is added. This poetry does not share the oral tradition that forms the basis of the earlier work. Women figure fairly largely in this body of Christian poetry, but the main idea contained in the pieces based on the New Testament seems to be to embody in the poetry a reverence for the archetypal Virgin Mary figure. This can be seen by pointing to Judith, Elene, and Juliana, the purpose being to portray the pious crusader for God and to supplant the notion of the ideal heroic woman with the ideal Christian woman. There is no place here for the figure of the weeping woman, for a "Christian elegy" is itself a contradiction in terms and cannot be considered to exist in any pure form.

The only lamenting by a woman to be found in religious poetry is that of Eve, in Genesis B, where it is said that:

. þæt wif gnornode
 hof hreowigmod, (haefde hylde godes,
 lare forlaeten), þa heo þæt leoht geseah
 ellor scridan

(11. 770-773)

However, at the close of the poem, when it is the future, and not the past, that appears happy, the mood changes as:

(ac) hie on gebed feollon bu tu ætsomme
 morgena gewhilce, baedon mihtigne
 þæt hie ne forgeate god ælmihtig,
 and him gewisade waldend se goda,
 hu hie on þam leohte forð libban sceolden.

(11. 847-851)

Thus, the grief has been turned to hope because an answer has been found in God.

Juliana is the familiar "saint's life" story, and the heroine is pictured as one in whom "hire waes godes egisa / mara in gemyndum, þonne eall þæt maþþungesteald / þe in þæs ædelinges æhtum wunade". (11. 35-37) It is the tale of the triumph of Christianity over paganism, and, as its heroine, Juliana is "seo eadige . . . / gleaw ond gode leof" (11. 130-131), she has nothing to do with the society of ordinary men. The one who sings the song of woe is the devil, in line 615, when he "hearmleod agol", sang a song (not "giedd" here) of misery, stating that he "sceal feor þonan / heanmod hweorfan, hroþra bidaeled, / in gleda gripe, gehðu mænan". (11. 389-391)

The Elene poem does not offer much in the way of a description of the woman who is its central character, except for pointing out that she "wæs seo eadhredige Elene gemyndig, / þriste on gefance,

þeodnes willan / georn on mode", (ll. 266-268) the typical crusader for God, engaged on a holy mission and not to be dissuaded by the powers of evil.

The fragment that we have left us of the poem Judith again depicts the valorous virgin engaged in a battle for God, and here we see her actually taking part in the fight. How the roles have reversed, as we see Judith not the figure of peace but the Christian soldier:

. slog þa eorneste
ides ellenrof. oðre side
þone haednan. hund þæt him þæt heafod wand
forþ on þa flore.

(ll. 108-111)

The conclusion of the poem sees her triumphant.

Ealles þaes Iudith saegde
wuldorwearoda Dryhtne þe hire weorþ mynde geaf,
mærde on moldan rice, swelce eac mede on heofonum,
sigor lean on swegeles wuldre þaes-þe hio ahte
soþne geleafan
to þaem Eall-mihtigan.

(ll. 341-345)

To summarize, then: what I am arguing for here is not necessarily the logical progression from pagan to Christian forms in this literature, because we can never be sure just when these poems were written down, and by whom. However, we can fairly closely distinguish between those which were written down largely from communal memory and that have their roots in an oral and pagan tradition, and those which were translated from the Latin by inspired monks

who wished to eradicate pagan heritage and replace it with new Christian values and codes of behaviour. What I am arguing for, then, is the direct confrontation between two opposing ideologies, and that a significant example of where they differ can be seen in their treatment of women, both as recorded in the historical documents and the imaginative literature of the time.

Such a take-over of one tradition by another is certainly not easily accomplished, and not without much anguish on the part of those who feel an old way of life slipping away from them and who feel powerless to arrest the tide of change. The results of this anguish we see recorded in the Old English poetry examined here, and also in the uniquely Anglo-Saxon genre of the elegy. The exile alone, as illustrated by The Seafarer and The Wanderer, cast adrift on the sea of life is a common image, but an equally common one, and one which is largely ignored, is the figure of the professional female mourner lamenting the fate of her people.

The lamentation carries with it a great power of suggestion, and the emotional relief or catharsis afforded the Geats as they weep over the pyre of Beowulf is evident. It would be all the more indicative of frustration, helplessness, and sorrow, for a woman to be both a mourner and a figure of exile, cut off not only from her society and her husband but from her traditional role as public peacemaker and comforter. The grief caused by bereavement provides a natural

starting point for an elegy, and the Anglo-Saxon people would have recognized all of the connotations that accompany the voice of a woman keening, alone, in a barren landscape.

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE WIFE'S LAMENT

Many critics have claimed that The Wife's Lament is so enigmatic that it must of necessity be a part of a larger cycle including many poems, or at least of a much longer single poem. On the contrary, I believe that this poem can be proved to be extremely well-planned and complete in itself, both singular and single-minded in its purpose and effect. I will now undertake a detailed study of the language and structure of the poem in order to show how these subtly restate and reinforce the principal themes of grief and longing.

The first line establishes that what is to follow is a "sad song" by using the words "giedd" and "geomorre". It is also determined that this song will be personal, opening as it does with the pronoun "ic", with public or universal connotations as suggested by the ritual funeral associations of the word "giedd". The exile theme is added to the sorrow in line 5 with the word "wræcsiþa". And so, the first five lines present us with an outline, to be filled in by the details in the rest of the poem; this is a song, both lyric and formal, recited by a lonely woman exile. With all of this information given in such a short space, the claim that this poem is not well-planned appears ridiculous.

The most overwhelming aspect of this piece is the tone of

sadness that seems to thoroughly permeate it. Not only is it found within the bounds of the poem, but it continues on into the woman's conception of her future life. Words of sadness or mourning occur in twenty-three of the fifty-three lines, and many of the words are repeated more than once. "Geomor", in various forms, appears in lines 1, 17, 19, and 42. As one critic states, the persistence of verbs and languages of lament suggests an enduring action which anticipates no end.¹ This persistence can be shown by noting the number and variety of these terms for sorrow. In line 3, there is "yrmþa gebad"; line 5, "wite wonn"; line 7, "uhtceare"; line 10, "wineleas wræcca" and "weaþearfe"; line 14, "ladlicost"; line 17, "geomor"; line 19, "heardsælige, hygegeomorne"; line 31, "bitre"; line 32, "wynna leas"; line 38, "wepan" and "wræcsipas"; line 39, "earfoda"; line 40, "modceare"; line 42, "geomormod"; line 44, "breostceare"; line 45, "sinsorgna gedreag"; line 49, "werigmod"; line 50, "dreoged", line 51, "modceare"; line 52, "wa". From this list, one can readily see that the prevailing atmosphere is one of gloom. The only significant break in the mood comes at line 21 when the woman describes the happier time when she and her husband pledged their love to one another. The other principal theme, that of longing or desire, is cleverly woven into the mainstream of lamentation by a repetition of the verb "longian", in lines 14, 29, 41, and 52. Thus, as her misery is being closely defined and elaborated upon, unification with the theme of longing is achieved through a

repetition of words and phrases belonging to both, and a braiding together of the two. This is accomplished in line 14 with the juxtaposition of "lādlicost" and "longade", lines 40 and 41, where we find "modceare" and "longaþes", and lines 52 and 53, where woe and longing are tied together in the last pronouncement by the use of "wa" and "langode".

With this need to permeate the entire poem with the moods of sorrow and desire, there arises a further need, to expand the vocabulary to meet the need for new words that would limit and define the mood. As a result there is a large proportion of new compound words or "hapax legomena" in this poem. R.F. Leslie explains the new words away by saying that "the proportion of unusual words is so high that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some were to become obsolete later in the Old English period, and that they appear in these poems because they were written before the alliterative tradition hardened".² This may be so, but because the large majority of these new words seem to have to do with the elegiac mood of the poem, it is important that we note this need for expansion of the Old English vocabulary in order to meet the needs of a new genre. The new compounds that fall into this category are: "uhtceare", which reminds one of the story of Hildeburgh, who saw the treachery of her enemies "syþan morgen com" (l. 1077), "weaþearfe" which significantly joins again the two themes of need and sorrow, "sinsorgna", a word that indicates

the perpetual or infinite nature of the care which the woman has come to know as existent, and "dreorsele", which describes imaginatively the joyless hall which is the symbol of the disintegration of the comitatus way of life. The other original compounds are: "fromsid", "londstede" and "actreo". "Fromsid" emphasizes the journey motif, and reminds us that the journey of others is always away from, and not toward, the wife. The "stede" attached to the word "lond" pinpoints the fact that her new land was one that was an appointed place, one chosen for her by someone else. The oak tree is a familiar enough sight in folk tale, especially of the Norse variety, and this word then links this with the heroic folk-theme of the abandoned woman. The only other word which could be considered original is one which makes its only appearance in poetry in this poem, although it appears often in the laws. This word, "folcland", is defined by F.M. Stenton, as:

the land held under "folcriht" or common law, in contrast to land held by royal charter; men had no power₃ to dispose of folkland by will without a new grant from the King.

This word then carries the connotation that folkland was land that was not irrevocable, and which could be taken away upon the death of the owner; here, therefore, we have emphasized the idea that all is transitory, in a state of flux, and that even land is only yours while you are there to protect your interests.

While we are discussing the limitations of the Old English vocabulary, it must be pointed out that the ambivalence in the terms

for the woman's husband can be explained by noting that the idea of husband as equal partner and lover is completely alien to the Germanic mind. The Anglo-Saxons did not have a specific vocabulary for love poetry; in Beowulf, Hrothgar is referred to as Wealhtheow's "frea". (l. 641) Frequently, in the laws and in Maxims I, 2, l. 96, the husband is referred to as "ceorl" to denote his freeborn status. Elsewhere in the laws, a woman's husband is referred to as her "hlaford"⁴. In the poem under consideration here, I believe that there is only one man specifically spoken of. He is variously referred to as "leodfruma" (l. 8), "hlaford" (l. 6, 15), "þæs monnes" (l. 11), "ful gemæcne monnan" (l. 18), "mines fela leofan" (l. 25), "frea" (l. 33), "min freond" (l. 47), "min wine" (l. 50), and it must be noticed that, of this long list, only "hlaford" is used more than once. This would indicate to me a need of the woman, or the poet behind her, to define the relationship, to explore every facet of the union between two people, as had not previously been done in Old English poetry. There is no need to theorize that there might be more than one man mentioned in this poem. A husband could be all of these people to his wife, and especially, as she is trying to put together a composite picture of him from memory, she needs many words in order to give any kind of completeness to her conception of him.

In moving away from the heroic, comitatus society and toward the new concepts involved in a Christian, feudal one, an extraordinary

change must take place in regard to the individual within that society. The old way involved thinking of oneself only in relation to a group, as a retainer of some lord, as a woman, a wife in charge of the well-being of the hall, and even of a lord responsible for the safety of those who served him. The new concept involved, as I see it, becoming more and more responsible for oneself, for one's own well-being. When a lord adopted the Christian faith, his decision was not binding on the rest of his followers, and so, for the first time, a man must make a monumental decision that would profoundly affect his life, not as a member of a group, but as an individual. In this poem we can see the movement away from a group-consciousness toward that of the individual. The setting and situation, of course, add a great deal here, as a lonely exile is forced to think about his own welfare, but the preponderance of the first-person pronoun would indicate that there was more than a passing notion here that the individual was increasing in importance. Forms of the first-person pronoun appear, at least once, and often more, in lines: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 25, 27, 29, 32, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 47 and 50. Interestingly enough, the only breaks of any length that occur in this pattern come in the passage where she talks of the past, ll. 21-26, which was happier, and which was associated in her mind with a happy life with someone else, and in the gnomic passage, ll. 42-47a, in which the woman tries to obliterate her sorrow and loneliness by the

application of tribal wisdom to the cares and torment of life. Thus the idea of the group is associated with a past which has no further bearing on the reality of her life as she is now living it.

Another curious point about this poem is the frequent use of the dual pronoun; it is to be found in lines 12, 13, 21, 22, and 25. Besides the obvious fact that it is used to separate the two lovers from the rest of the world and focus attention on their relationship with one another, it also points up again the moving away from the conception of the woman as public figure, responsible for the welfare of all of the men in the hall, to the woman as private figure, responsible only to herself and to her husband. There are then only two halves to life, and the one half has been taken from her; there can be no happiness without her husband. The shift then is from the consciousness of oneself in relation to the social group, to the realization that one is primarily alone in this life, and the only happiness that is to be found, with another individual, is apt to be taken away; this, then, is a source of continuing sorrow.

The idea that this sadness is something to which there is no foreseeable end is reinforced by the use of the adverb "a". Occurring alone, as it does in lines 5 and 42, and joined to the verb "bidan" in line 53, it, like the pronouns, and the words of sorrow and longing, reinforces the themes by means of repetition throughout the length of the poem. We are not allowed to forget for a moment

that there is no hope offered here.

If one looks carefully at the verbs in this poem, it must be noticed that only two verbs have anything to do with physical action, and of these two, "gewat" which is used in lines 6 and 9, describes action that has taken place in the past. The only verb that describes present action is "gonge" in line 35, and this action is an extremely weak one. The poem then, does not take place in the realm of present activity, but in the mind of the narrator. This removes it a step further from the heroic world and the folk-tale and brings it into the contemplative elegiac world which the Anglo-Saxons claimed as their own. This poem is not quite a lyric, as the bursts of spontaneous emotion come only during the passage that begins at line 21, and the cry at the end of the poem. The rest of the poem, as it takes place in her mind, is being carefully worked out in order to find an answer, a process common to other elegiac poems such as The Seafarer and The Wanderer.

The verbs in the poem then, that concern manners of speaking or lamenting, waiting, and thinking are: wrece, secgan, gebad, hycgan, lifdon, longade, het, beotedan, dreogan, begeat, sittan, wepan, gerestan, gemon, abidan. Also, these verbs, I believe, have been skilfully used to bring out the different connotations that they may have. For instance, the verb "dreogan", as used in line 26, makes much more sense if interpreted as having its alternate meaning of "to

take part in". This would eliminate the critical problem of its appearing that the wife is suffering from some hardship at the hands of her husband; nowhere else in the poem does it appear that she has changed her feelings toward, or in any way blames her husband for what has happened. If "dreogan" means "take part in" here, then we get the idea that because she remains his wife, she is inextricably bound up in the family feud; also, we cannot ignore the connotations of suffering that go along with this verb, and so the two ideas are subtly combined. The use of "dreogan" again, in line 50, this time to refer to the husband, further binds the two together in a common sorrow.

It remains now to discuss the gnomic passage at the end of The Wife's Lament. One of the most noticeable things about this passage is the shift in the mood of the verbs, from subjunctive to active, which seem, at first glance, inexplicable. However, a close examination will prove that the subjunctive and the active moods of the verbs have a great deal to do with the themes of illusion and reality. As mentioned before, the woman seems to be appealing, in the passage beginning at line 42, to the repository of communal knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon world, known as gnomic wisdom. As can be illustrated by reference to the Maxims, especially Maxims I, 3, 1. 177, "a scyle" is a gnomic formula which indicates an eternal truth that is to follow. However, the next verb in the passage is "sceal", the

same verb, only this time in the indicative mood. The woman seems to be vacillating between the truths taught by tribal wisdom, and the reality of life as she sees it. The young man with the keen mind in the face of sorrow is an encouraging thought, but the wife knows that sorrow often cannot be borne with a cheerful countenance, not the kind of sorrow which she has known. Here "blide gebæro", lifted from its happier context in line 21 takes on a note of irony when applied to the harsh realities of the present. At line 45, the woman again reverts to the subjunctive mood with the verb form "sy". Here, it is used in the sense of an illusion again, but this time there is a conjectural or hypothetical note that has been added. The verb here carries the connotation of "if"; it is not true that there is a young man who is also an enemy of his people, dependent only on himself, far from home, but she wishes that all young men could see the uselessness of these heroic pronouncements in the face of an actual situation. The word "þæt" in line 47 brings her back to the thoughts of her husband; the pronoun here has the force of meaning "in the way that", as it does in Homiletic Fragments, I, 548, l. 23: "Sittende he tæhte, þæt belimped towurðscipe lareow domes".⁵ "þæt" draws the hypothetical young man into an imaginative union with the husband, and the next verb is in the indicative mood, "sited", as it is, to her, at least, the reality of the horror of his existence without her. She has previously described herself as sitting and weeping under the

oak-tree; now he is described as sitting under a stone-cliff, a picture which again draws the two people into a common situation. In line 52, the verb again is "sceal", indicative, as the last line is a peculiar blend of gnomic and elegiac and lyric poetry, indicating the confusion as well as the sorrow in her mind, and leaving us with the final impression of profound uncertainty as well as sorrow. This, at least, is a pronouncement that is real. Woe is a continuous state of mind, present intense, and indicative in mood.

After this close examination of the text of The Wife's Lament, one must admit that the poem certainly was not haphazardly constructed. In the next chapter, I will explain in detail how the personal and universal have been blended in this elegy. It is certainly apparent that the construction of the poem, with its parallelism, repetition, and new word-compounds, reinforces and restates the themes of longing or desire and perpetual sorrow, which are at the core of the meaning of the poem. It is ultimately complete in itself and needs no complement, in folk-tale, or in other poetry such as The Husband's Message for it to take on meaning. The words of sorrow and longing for a happier past mark it as elegiac in mood; this idea is strengthened as the first-person singular and dual pronouns draw it away from the comitatus concept of group life and into the individual world of the elegy and the lyric, and the contemplative verbs remove the poem from the physical, tangible world of the heroic, and into the realm of

individual consciousness. Here, indeed is evidence of profound change, in the most fundamental ways of thinking and being.

VI

THE WIFE'S LAMENT AS ELEGY

Finding that The Wife's Lament did not provide them with a cut and dried plot outline indicating exactly how and why the woman found herself in her miserable situation, many critics have brought in such extraneous material as folk-tale and other poetry in order to explain the plot. While the stories found in folk literature may be helpful in establishing that The Wife's Lament has its roots in the poetry of the people, only careful attention to the text itself can tell us what exactly has happened to the woman, and how this description of her plight contributes to the overall theme and intention of the poem. While the narrative may not be the single most important element in the poem, it certainly cannot be ignored or labelled incomprehensible, and therefore of no consequence in fixing a place for The Wife's Lament in the canon of Old English poetry.

In the preceding chapter, it has been pointed out that the verbs of thinking are predominant over those of action. This, then, makes the actual setting of the poem the mind of the narrator, borne out by the non-chronological relation of the events in the woman's life. Before going further, I think that it would be wise to explain what I feel an Old English elegy to be, and then it can readily be determined why I believe that The Wife's Lament fits the description of this genre so well.

The elegy presupposes a narrator who suddenly finds himself alone or who suddenly realizes that he is alone. When one was secure within the comitatus society, one was never alone. When there was grief, the gnomic tribal wisdom had a ready answer; by the time that the truly Christian poetry was being written, the answer was to be found in God's love and mercy. Grief (over a death) is a natural starting-point for the elegy because it provides one with the feeling that he has been deserted, left behind to carry on amid the desolation of this world, while the troubles of the departed one are over. Elegy contains a certain element of self-pity as well, because the speaker feels cheated of happiness by fate and its attendant circumstances. The elegy then, is best expressed by someone alone, the emotions of grief and bitterness being predominant in his heart. Added to this solitary state is the idea that there is no one with whom the speaker can work out his problem. The Maxims point to the old way of working out difficulties: "Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan" (Maxims I, 1, 1. 4). Interestingly enough, this provides us with the idea that "giedd" may also have overtones of one of life's mysterious questions, an unsolveable problem. At any rate, the speaker of the elegy, having no one to sympathize with him, must search his own soul to find an answer. Of necessity then, the person's past must be searched for clues to the present situation and possible answers for the future.

The plot, then, of any elegy, is important to the extent that

as the speaker is reliving it, so must the reader. The past events provide the reason not only for the present predicament but also for the entire mood of the poem. Because the woman here goes over her life, as she remembers it, the time sequence, when viewed carefully, becomes much more logical. She begins in line 6 with the event that is the most important to her, the one that changed her life completely: "aerest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodum". The lines from 9 to 14 describe the immediate consequences of the departure of her husband; she went to seek help, a friendless exile from her own native land, but her husband's relatives, for reasons that are unknown to the woman, and so which must remain unknown to us, because she is unfolding the contents of her own memory, begin to plot against the couple so that they should remain apart, and in misery, for the rest of their days. At line 15, the wife probes deeper into her memory and recalls the time when her husband, according to custom, brought her from her homeland to his; however, this was the beginning of her grief, because she had been uprooted from her own kin-group and transplanted in a land where she knows no one. On top of this, her husband seems to have experienced some hard fortune, and is himself upset, and involved in some violence. Her description of what she feels his situation at present to be, at the end of the poem, coupled with the associations with the word "fah", suggests that the husband has been exiled as a public enemy, and this would explain why he cannot return to her.

From the point of the beginning of her sorrow, the wife goes further back and remembers the one happy thing in her life as it is described here; she and her husband once pledged that they would never part, that only death would separate them. Lines 21 - 23a contain one of the two lyric outbursts in the poem. The contrast between her present grief and her past happiness is so great that the explosive juxtaposition of these thoughts produce an emotional outburst that is characteristic more of the lyric than of the elegy. This brings out another of the traits of the elegy; it is primarily a well-considered speech, and not a violent eruption. An elegy concerns the working-out of a problem, and because of this, it must contain a great amount of reflection and reasoning.

Line 23b shows the result of the lyric outburst on the woman's memory pattern; she returns abruptly to the immediate present with the pronouncement that "eft is þæt onhworfen". In line 25, she resigns herself to the fact that wherever she is, in time or space, she must always be a part of the feuds which involve her loved-one. The use of the word "felaleofan" here proves that she has in no way changed her attitude toward her husband; she does not hold him responsible for her plight. Blaming him would not provide her with the answer to her question. From line 27 on, the woman describes her present surroundings. In this description is to be found another of the characteristics of the elegy. A descriptive passage in an elegy

is there by virtue of what it can contribute to the sombre, sorrowful mood of the poem as a whole, and to the reasons for its being uttered at all. The forest grove and the oak tree provide the darkness and shade. They also have associations with heathen funeral rites, which would add to the aura of gloom. The valleys are dim, the hills high around, and the old fortified towns deserted and grown over with briars. The joyless dwelling, the earth-cave, is allied with her longing, and the two moods are brought together to complete our idea of the atmosphere which brought forth this elegy.

In line 32, the woman explains that often she felt angry because she was left behind, but the verb "begeat" is in the past tense. She has already found that anger is not the answer she seeks. She is understandably bitter that others are happy while she is not, but bitterness is a continuing part of her mood, which has followed from her anger. She ends this passage on a note of hopelessness. Her own situation she sees as unchanging; she sits through the longest days of the year, mourning and weeping, and she sees that she "æfre ne mæg" calm the cares and longings of her mind.

What the woman has described to us is the misery which her life has become. She is alone, surrounded by darkness and briars and deserted towns. When, in the last part of the poem, she imagines her husband's situation, the picture she conjures up completes her idea of the Anglo-Saxon version of hell. He is banished from his country,

branded an enemy; the countryside is stony and there is a snow-storm; he seems to be on an island, as he is surrounded by water; he too is sad of mind and remembering happier days. This is a far cry from the fire and brimstone hell of the Christian poetry. What we have here is the hell of the Germanic society; there are not many souls in torment, just one, alone, crying in the cold and desolate wilderness.

In the fantasy of her projection of her husband's situation, it is so akin to the way that she herself feels, that she is convinced that what she sees in her mind is reality. A similar vision is experienced by the solitary man in *The Wanderer*, as he says:

. Sorg biþ geniwad,
 þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfed
 greted gliwstafum, georne geondsceawad
 secga geseldan. Swimmað eft on weg!
 (1. 50-53)

Always, when she speaks of him she does so in the indicative mood, indicating her belief in these statements as fact. The only place where the subjunctive mood is used, indicating conjecture, is when she tries to apply the gnomic wisdom of the comitatus to their misery, and finds that it does not stand up in the face of what really happens in life. Therefore, she rejects the gnome, what had been the ultimate answer for the heroic society, as no longer being of any use.

The poem ends on a note that is curious; the mood is indicative, indicating that woe and longing are indeed real. This is elegiac in mood, a facing of facts as they are and seeing no hope.

The outburst itself is lyric, in that again we have an explosive juxtaposition, this time not past and present, but illusion and reality, which sparks a spontaneous cry for help. At the same time however, the formula is curiously gnomic. In Maxims I, 3, l. 172-173, we find; "Earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan,/ wineleas wunian hafaþ him wyrd geteod". Therefore, we can see that the sentiment expressed is not a new one. The lonely man is a familiar figure; however, the way in which it is expressed here is new, and of course, the woman speaker, lamenting for a single loved person rather than a community of friends. We have then, even in this blend of genres and ideas, no answer. We are left with a cry in the night which echoes from the "duna uphea" (l. 30), and comes back to haunt the mourner.

Even though the description in lines 476-52 are of the husband, the vision is the wife's and one can readily see how her own surroundings have informed her picture of his. Not only is he alone, but he too is exposed to the cruelty of the elements, and the oak tree and the earth-cave have become an overhanging stone cliff. Her mood of longing and grief is transferred to him, as, in her mind, the two lovers are linked in the words "modceare" and "langode"; she is trying to wish her dream into reality, but the last line proves that she knows that it cannot be.

The elegy then, as this poem fits the definition so far given, certainly contains a personal tragedy which gives rise to a

mood and thence to an outpouring of the story of this grief, in song. However, I also believe that the elegy has more universal overtones. Just as the heroic tales had their messages, so too the elegy speaks of something beyond the sorrow of the individual. We have looked at the word "giedd" before, and it seems that it is the starting point for the idea of a more general application of the message in the elegy. It has so many varied connotations that one cannot help but recognize that it is not just a catch-word for song. The "giedd" is associated with formal funeral rites, with mourning; it has overtones of a wise, sad, perhaps obscure saying exchanged by wise men; in The Seafarer, the "soþgied" (l. 1) is the song of a lonely man; and finally, it contains elements of the unanswerable question, the riddle of life, thrown at the heavens in a kind of hopeless, last-stand defiance. Therefore, the "giedd" cannot be entirely personal. It belongs to a people, to a way of life. The woman here is a spokesman for that way of life. Where, she asks, as she goes back in the collective memory of the comitatus society, did we go wrong? There is internal strife among kinsmen. There is secret plotting, violence, hard fortune, and all this after we had pledged to be comrades forever. Now all of the old ways are "onhworfen". The fortified towns are deserted, and grown over with briars; the old society can no longer defend itself from attacks by outsiders when it cannot arrest the crumbling of its structure from within. The overall

impression of this life is one of utter sterility. The wife here, like the last survivor, in Beowulf, is the last one of her people left, and she has no way of either bringing back the old ways or providing the world with new. Not only is the landscape barren, but interestingly enough, so is the woman here. In a number of the old folk-tales, there appears the motif of the woman cast-away on an island by her people; however, she is generally cast away with her children. Then, by some mysterious chain of events, she is rescued and her children are saved. Here no miracle happens, and the woman has been left by her husband before she can bear him any children. The old ways, the old race is dying. The history of the Anglo-Saxons shows that the same thing that happened to the Roman Britons with the coming of the Saxons happened to the Anglo-Saxons in turn. The British became a conglomerate race, with no one culture or set of customs. It would seem to me then that, like the old Geatish woman weeping at the funeral pyre of Beowulf, the wife here is lamenting not for the people nor the customs that have died, but for those who must live on to face what will be the ensuing struggle for identification in a changing world.

I must return now to my definition of the elegy, and recapitulate. This genre then, can be seen to be not only personal but universal, spoken by a lone individual who is going over past history in order to find the key to the future. The past, when reviewed,

is seen to be happier by far than the present, and the future is seen to be bleak and without promise of any better days to come. The elegy is the product of a rational mind, a well-planned and executed song of sorrow. The setting, mood and story share equal importance as parts of a unified whole. It has its roots in heroic society, but has lyric tendencies, first of all because it is primarily a song, sung by someone who is alone, and also because of the extremely emotional mood of the speaker, which now and then breaks into the rational thought pattern. Finally, there can be no reconciliation in an elegy, because the question is never answered. There is only the pathetic realization of the futility of even asking for an answer to the question "why" when you are dealing with life lived at a level lower than the gods.

From this definition, one can readily see why I feel that The Wife's Lament is the most perfect of those poems which are commonly held to be elegies. Most of the others, such as The Seafarer and The Wanderer are elegiac in mood during the first parts, but seem to go a long way toward resolving many of the difficulties of the speakers towards their conclusions. The Wanderer, of the two, seems more unsure of his pronouncement: "Wel bið þam þe him are seceð, frofre to faeder on heofonum, þær us eal seo faestnung stondeð". (l. 114-115) He is still overwhelmed by the thought that his world, which he had thought so secure, has turned out to be "læne" (l. 109).

We see in the elegy then, the expression of a sudden realization that the old comitatus way of life is not as permanent as the Maxims would have liked men to believe. The Wife's Lament best demonstrates this feeling of dislocation, of loss, because all of its component parts contribute to the aura of grief and uncertainty which surrounds it. The story itself concerns a woman who is cast out, a friendless exile, separated from her beloved husband by cruel relatives, and who sees no hope for a reunion, either with her loved one or her people. The vocabulary is not only persistent in its impressing on us the feelings of grief and longing, but it contains so many Old English words that are unique to this poem that we are made aware that even the language of the Anglo-Saxons is unsettled, forced to create anew to meet the exigencies of a changing society. The deserted towns and the civil disagreements reflect the reports in the histories which tell of innumerable raids and battles which were threatening the Anglo-Saxons with destruction. The failure of the attempt at solving the problem by means of gnomic wisdom points to the failure of the very core of Anglo-Saxon knowledge to cope with the changes taking place in the customs and way of life of the people.

The Anglo-Saxons then, would recognize in the elegy, and in this poem in particular, an interpretation of their confusion, their feeling of helplessness in the face of oncoming disaster, their sense of the loss of a beloved and time-honoured way of life. The figure of

the woman, barren, alone, crying for a lost love, would be one with whom they could identify. If they were forced to go on with the business of living, there must be someone, a professional mourner, who could speak for them, express their feelings, and through whom they achieve some measure of catharsis. The elegy, then, and particularly The Wife's Lament, expresses a desperate desire for knowledge and understanding, coupled with the realization that the answers are not to be gained without much mental anguish and the endurance born of suffering.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I

¹Levin Schücking, "Das angelsächsische Gedicht von der Klage der Frau", Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterum und deutsches Literatur, 48, New Series 36 (1906), 437-449.

²A.N. Doane, "Heathen Form and Christian Function in The Wife's Lament", Mediaeval Studies, 28 (1966), 81.

Chapter II

¹Schücking, "Das angelsächsische Gedicht von der Klage der Frau", passim.

²Rudolph Bambas, "Another View of the Old English The Wife's Lament", JEGP, LXII, passim.

³Bellows, The Poetic Edda. All subsequent references to the Edda are taken from this edition.

⁴Ker, Epic and Romance, 216.

⁵Henry, English and Celtic Lyric, passim.

⁶Doane, "Heathen Form and Christian Function", 81.

⁷Bouman, Old English and Old Icelandic Literature, 96.

⁸Kemp Malone, "Two English Frauenlieder", Comparative Literature, XIV (1962), 116.

⁹Dunleavy, "Celto-Saxon Elegy", passim.

¹⁰Robert P. Fitzgerald, "The Wife's Lament and the Search for the Lost Husband", JEGP, LXII, 769.

¹¹Stevick, Middle English Lyrics, 150, ll. 5-9.

¹²Ibid., 30.

¹³Ibid., 84.

¹⁴Dietmar von Aist, "The Falcon" in Des Minnesangs Frühling, Hrsg. Carl von Kraus, Göttingen: Johannes Illig, 1950, 37, 4.
Translation by Dr. E. Blodgett, University of Alberta.

Chapter III

¹Leslie, Elegies, 35.

²Hodgkin, History, II, 383.

³Leslie, 34.

⁴Hodgkin, I, 209.

⁵Ibid., 215.

⁶Ibid., 342.

⁷Attenborough, Laws, 15.

⁸Whitelock, Beginnings of English Society, 94.

⁹Whitelock, Historical Documents, I, 359-360.

¹⁰Ibid., 408.

¹¹Ibid., 429.

¹²Henry, English and Celtic Lyric, 117-118.

Chapter IV

¹Tauno F. Mustanoja, "The Unnamed Woman's Song of Mourning Over Beowulf and the Tradition of Ritual Lamentation", Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 68, 15.

Chapter V

¹Stevick, Middle English Lyrics, 306-307

²Leslie, Elegies, 35-36

³F.M. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 23.

⁴Whitelock, Historical Documents, I, 370.

⁵Andrew, Syntax and Style, 43.

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